

1171

There were only a few sources of weak light: pits in the center, like someone had dug holes for campfires, and circled them with skulls. In the pit, a burning bush stood, large, with a steady but spindly flame. Past the fire pit was nothing but more open space, pillars, another fire pit, and finally another wall. The place was big enough to hold thousands of demons if they crammed together hard enough, and the doorway big enough to allow something twice as big as Zel inside.

There was a pulpit near the far wall, something so big even Zel would look dwarfed behind it. Even so far away, it was obviously made of more bones, an imperfect shape made of skulls and rib cages, and as Zel and Mia approached, the crisscross of bones that made up its top came into view. She was wrong about the fire pits being the only source of light. An amber light glowed at the top of the pulpit, too high for Mia to see what it was.

Zel stepped up behind the pulpit. It stood on a stage with small stairs, thousands of bones that'd been stacked perfectly and somehow held their shape as Zel's heavy body weighed on each. But even at the top of the stairs behind the pulpit, she had to reach up to touch its surface. Whoever used the pulpit had been almost twice as tall as Zel.

She stepped down from the small stage, a giant book in hand, and grinned down at Mia as she sat on the edge of the stairs. The way Zel was not only comfortable and happy to do things herself, but move around like a normal person and not a pompous queen wearing a corset and crown, made her endearing. That wasn't good. Much better to keep her framed as an evil, conniving bitch who'd rip out Mia's guts the moment she thought Mia's life didn't matter. The truth was somewhere in the middle, but better safe than sorry. *Ww.nOvels.O@m.cm*

"Come, sit," Zel said, gesturing to the small stairway that surrounded the stage.

Mia squinted at her, but Zel's smile remained. The demon held the giant book on her lap with two hands, while two other hands idly plucked at her necklace and her nipple chain with her black claws. She was excited, fidgeting, and didn't want Mia to notice. Well, Mia did notice, because she'd been halfway through Psych 201 before she died. She was great at reading people! Okay, that was a lie, but she was getting better at it.

After a hopefully unnoticeable gulp, she stood beside Zel on the stairs.

"That is a scary looking book," Mia said, gesturing to the cover. "Pretty sure I've seen something like this in Evil Dead."

The book cover wasn't made of skin, but more of the black bone everything else was made of. Someone had somehow merged the bones horizontally, hundreds of small bones, probably from fingers. Subtle amber glow came from between them, from the pages underneath. A single skull decorated the cover, almost like emerging from black water. The amber light underneath it came up through the empty eyes, nose, and between the jaw.

"You... sure you want to open that?"

Zel chuckled and looked up at Mia; her sitting down meant Mia, standing beside her, had a few inches on her. *(v)v.W.NoV.I@.Rm.ĉ@m*

"I have opened it before." She traced some claws down the cover before looking to the door. "Kas, Adron, wait outside, in the tunnel."

Mia snapped her eyes up to the door of the cathedral. Kas and Adron stood there, and without hesitation, they both nodded, closed the cathedral doors, and headed back toward the tunnel. Zel did not move until the she heard the second pair of doors close. Mia was officially alone with the queen of Death's Grip, and what might as well have been a book of evil spells and summoning rituals in her hands. If Mia couldn't do what Zel was hoping she could, there'd be hell to pay.

Slowly, Zel opened the book. The silent room turned into a black hole. Something sucked the life out of it, and the light, too. Mia forced herself to breathe, tore her eyes away from the runes written on the pages, and looked back out to the fire pits with the burning bushes inside them. Still there, still burning, still quietly crackling. Just a figment of her active imagination.

"Every page in this book is written in the ancient language," Zel said, and she traced a claw down the amber runes, still plucking at her bracelets, necklaces, and nipple chains. Excited, or nervous? Maybe even a little scared?

The pages were black, too, and from the way Zel's claws dragged over them, making quiet scraping sounds, they were made of stone. Someone had managed to capture the amber veins inside slivers of rock not even a millimeter thick. Holy shit.

Mia's eyes locked onto the runes under Zel's claws. They were large, only enough for a few on the first page, and they stood up and begged to be read.

"Death's Grip. Lucifer. Belial," Mia whispered.

Zel sighed with bliss, and turned the page.

Whoever wrote the runes was a professional calligrapher. The glowing lines flowed across the page, a bit smaller than the first page, but still only half a dozen runes.

"You... want me to read all this?"

"Perhaps. That will depend on what we find. Go on."

After a long, heavy breath, Mia looked down at the colossal pages, and began.

"This child of mine, Belial, they shall rule Death's Grip and all within."

Zel's grin dripped with hunger, and she turned to the next page. *WwV.nOvels.O@m.cm*

"I have wrought my will upon my kin, and have blessed this land with death."

Zel shivered. Mia might as well have whispered dirty talk in her ear, with how she was reacting. The cathedral agreed. The burning bushes exploded with light, the fires grew until they reached far and high, and rumbling crackling sounds buried the silence.

"Oh my," Zel said, looking to the flames. "Continue." With a starving claw, Zel slowly turned the stone page.

Mia took another deep breath and wiped some sweat from her forehead. Reading this was... tiring.

"In these mountains, scarred, burned, and molded, Belial's brood fight amongst themselves."

"As I suspected," Zel said, "these weren't written by Belial. They were written by Lucifer."

"Holy shit." Mia took a small step away. "Should I really read this? Stuff written by Satan himself?"

"Presumptuous to assume one of the archangels was male, a being that sailed the cosmos long before life existed, before men and women. Before bacteria."

That was a good point. Even demons didn't really fit the male female roles considering they weren't the ones reproducing. But Zel was obviously female physically, and Adron, Diogo, and everyone else called Zel 'her'. How did that work?

She was stalling. She didn't want to read from a book Satan wrote. Who would? It might as well have been written in Latin, with her unwittingly summoning the archangel with some mysterious passage. At any moment, orchestral music complete with Gregorian chanting would start playing.

Mia forced herself back in close to Zel's side, and the demon queen turned the page.

"Rise, children of my first. Rise. Obey. I shall rip the fire asunder, and reclaim the Heavens." *WwV.no(v)EW.stM.C@m*